

The Call for Reparations and Police Harassment

On March 29, 1968, five hundred people gathered in Detroit, convened by Parks's friends Milton and Richard Henry, to discuss the need for justice, reparations, and black autonomy — and the potential for creating a black nation within the United States. Two days later, one hundred people signed a document forming the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Afrika (RNA), outlining a doctrine for the black nation and naming a provisional leadership. The RNA advocated a separate state for African Americans to be formed in the five “black belt” states of Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Georgia, and South Carolina as land due black people as reparations for the legacy of slavery. Parks followed and occasionally participated in the RNA's activities and was called on for help at key moments.

By most accounts, Parks did not attend the RNA's second annual convention on March 29, 1969, which resulted in a historic confrontation between black radicals and the Detroit police. Three hundred people gathered at Reverend C.L. Franklin's New Bethel Church. As the meeting finished, a shooting occurred outside the church. In response, the police broke down the doors of the church, poured hundreds of rounds of ammunition into the church, and brutally arrested all the men, women, and children gathered. Several convention members were wounded. One young policeman was killed and another wounded. The entire convention remaining at that point, 140 people, was arrested en masse.

Reverend Franklin called black judge George Crockett to inform him of the mass arrests. Many black activists, including Parks and Franklin, had worked hard to see Crockett elected to Recorder's Court in 1966. A bold legal advocate, Crockett had defended the eleven members of the Communist Party charged with violation of the Smith Act; represented Coleman Young and others before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC); and worked with the National Lawyers Guild in Mississippi. As a judge in Recorder's Court, Crockett had been devoted to rooting out police misconduct and establishing firmer judicial oversight.

In the middle of the night, Judge Crockett proceeded to the police station, where he found legal disarray. The 140 people from the RNA convention were being held incommunicado. In disregard of customary procedure, everyone was being treated as suspects but no one had actually been charged. An indignant Crockett set up court right in the station house, demanding the police either press charges or release people. He had handled about fifty cases, releasing most of the men, women, and children, when the Wayne County prosecutor, who had been called in by the police, interceded and promised a return to normal procedures.

Crockett came under tremendous criticism for this intervention. White politicians and citizens called for his impeachment. 200,000 people signed a petition spearheaded by the Detroit police officers' association accusing Crockett of “gross misconduct.” In response, a Black United Front of nearly sixty organizations ranging from the NAACP to the RNA coalesced to support Judge Crockett. On April 3, 1969, over three thousand people demonstrated on behalf of Crockett. Greatly disturbed by

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the police action at New Bethel, Parks was active in the campaign to defend Judge Crockett. On a slip of paper for a speech to Detroit's Alabama Club, she highlighted the similarities between police brutality in Montgomery and Detroit and then noted "my experiences with Judge Crockett," perhaps suggesting some personal tie to the events at New Bethel or Crockett's actions at the police station.